



The College Search:

Part 2 - Getting In and Determining the Value (ROI) of a Degree

Take a deep breath and know this: The average four-year college in the United States accepts six out of every 10 applicants.¹

In fact, the majority of colleges have a seat for most applicants. And, three-quarters of college freshmen nationwide reported in recent years that they enrolled at their top-choice college.² Yet colleges where seats are scarce raise the anxiety level of teenagers and parents every year, as top-ranked institutions reject thousands of students who could thrive on their campuses.

Part 1 of The College Search outlined how to find the right fit in a campus. Part 2 focuses on what's most important in applying to college and ways to determine the value of a degree.



¹ Melissa Clinedinst and Pooja Patel, "2018 State of College Admission," National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC).

² E. B. Stolzenberg, M. K. Eagen, E. Romo, The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2018, Higher Education Research Institute University of California, Los Angeles.

Holistic admissions



Holistic admissions is a process that considers factors beyond grades and test scores.

This approach, which attempts to measure qualities that aren't quantifiable, such as an applicant's extracurricular activities, essays and recommendations, is what makes admissions seem like such a secret process to applicants. When you're a high-school student (or the parent of one), it feels like another 10 points on the SAT or one extra AP course can tip the scales.

Every college has priorities for admissions that change over time and no two have exactly the same needs. In a given year, that might mean more full payers, humanities majors or students from under-represented areas of the country.

Sometimes the goals are narrower: a pitcher for the baseball team, a goalie for the soccer team or an oboist for the orchestra. Many colleges give special consideration to applicants with deep and lasting connections to the school, such as the children of alumni and employees.

So, in the end, a rejection is not about you – it's about what a college needs the year you apply. Just because a college accepts 25 percent of its applicants doesn't mean you have a one-in-four chance of getting in.

That said, here are a few areas where high school students should dedicate their time and energy.



What matters the most: High school courses and grades

Nothing matters more in getting into college than the courses a student takes in high school and the grades they receive. At some colleges, those two factors get students more than halfway to the finish line of receiving an acceptance.



The High School Profile

The high school profile is one aspect of the process that students probably never see or know exists, but is critical because it gives a snapshot of their high school. It's the "context" for the applicant that tells admissions officers what you had access to in your school and community. The profile shows what courses you could have taken in high school, and your transcript shows what you chose to take.



Course Selection

Admissions readers, who often determine which applications go to the admissions officers, want to know not only that you chose to take the hardest courses available in your high school, but also what your interests are. The more advanced classes your high school offers, the more you're expected to take. Course selection is viewed as an example of your "growth mindset," indicating you want to stretch yourself and learn new things.

So don't skip upper-level math courses just because you don't like math. If Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses are available to you, take them, especially if you can get the IB Diploma.

While many selective colleges count the number of AP courses you took, others don't. Worry less about the number you take and more about how your choices reflect a true interest and deep commitment to the academic areas you care about.



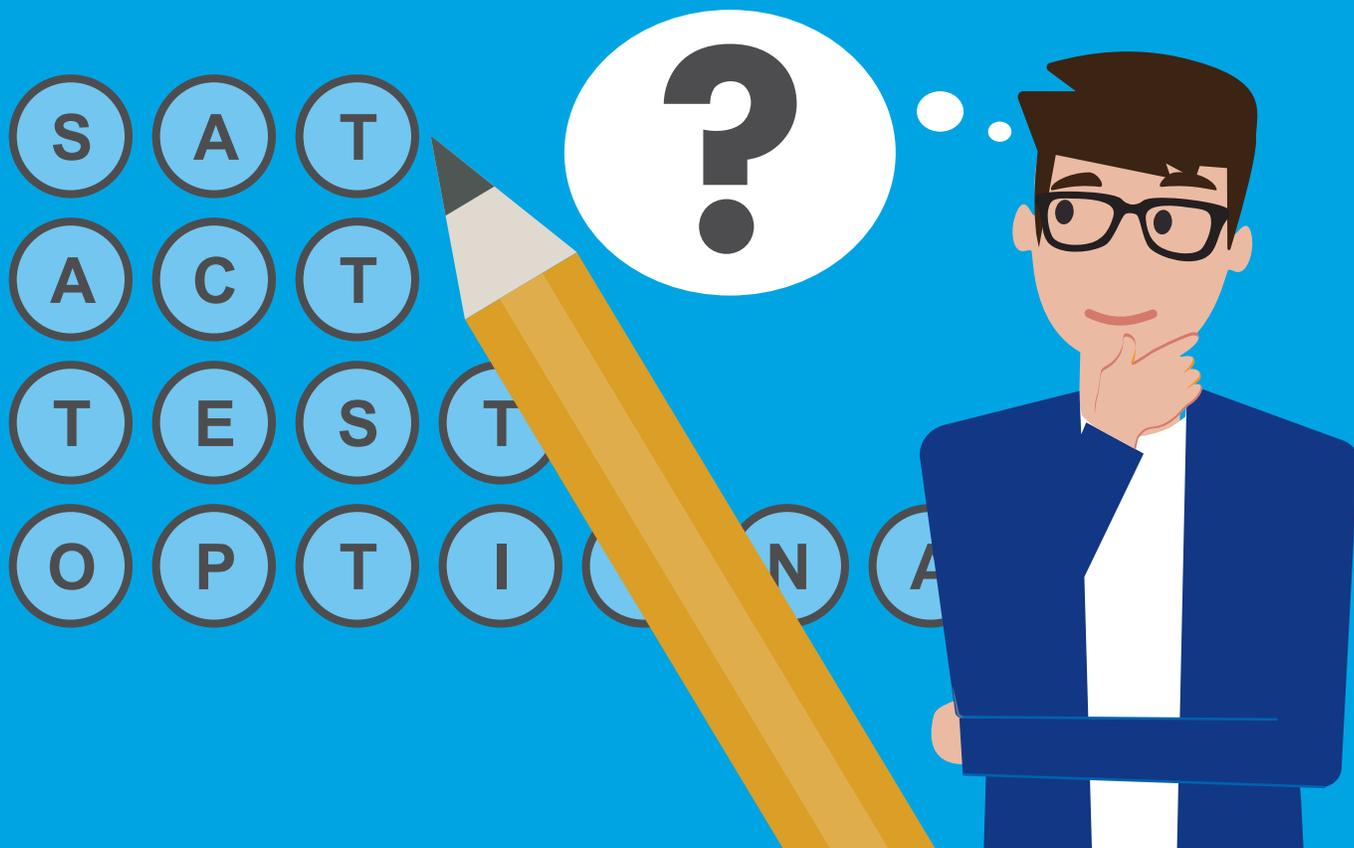
Grades

Grading in high schools has become convoluted. Some use a 10-point increment on a 100-point scale; others use a 7-point scale. At many, the 5.0 has become the new 4.0. Points are added to GPAs for any combination of honors, AP, or dual-enrollment courses. Schools have multiple valedictorians, as well as students with all As and a few Bs who rank below the top tenth. And then there are a handful of private schools that don't even give grades but instead write full-page reports for each student.

Ultimately, admissions officers are trying to determine where grades fall overall in the senior class, and where a particular student fits into that scheme.

Admissions officers also study trends, looking for consistency or a steady rise. So, keep grades consistent right through senior year. What concerns them is a downward trend or one that is "spiky."

Standardized tests



SAT vs. ACT:

A generation ago, students took one or the other: The SAT was popular with students along the coasts; the ACT in the Midwest. Now, students sometimes take both—maybe several times—and submit only their best scores. In the past, colleges wanted to see all scores. Today, most schools give students a choice about which scores they supply. While students might favor one test over another, schools requiring standardized test scores for admissions remain agnostic.

Test-Optional:

During the COVID-19 pandemic more than 600 colleges and universities, including the entire Ivy League, became test-optional for students applying for 2021 entry, joining a growing list of more than 1,000 schools that are already test-optional.³ This may be a trend that continues and may be here to stay—even post-pandemic—for more and more schools.

Applicants always place more weight on the tests than admissions officers do, because a test score is quantifiable. Even at test-optional schools, many students—a majority in some years—still submit scores. But during the pandemic, taking the test was nearly impossible, and the number of applicants submitting scores at many selective schools fell to half the application pool in some cases.

Test-optional is likely here to stay among a broad selection of schools. The question about whether to submit or not depends on where you're applying. Look for the middle 50 percent of test scores for a particular college (either on their Common Data Set through a web search or in the U.S. News rankings). Nothing is a sure bet, but your chances are better if your score is at the top of that range or—better yet—above it. That's when you should consider submitting your score to a test-optional college, especially if you think the score adds to your application as a signal of your potential and isn't just more noise.

Test scores matter the most when admissions officers have questions about an applicant's courses (not rigorous enough) or grades (not consistent) and might use the test score as a check against those other measures.

³ Fair Test: <https://www.fairtest.org/university/optional>.

What else: Essays, recommendations, activities and demonstrated interest

ESSAYS

The effort applicants spend writing their essays is often inversely proportional to the time admissions officers devote to reading them. In reviewing five to six applications in an hour, admissions officers tend to speed-read the essays, so make the opening compelling. The best essays are honest slice-of-life stories, both entertaining and serious, that tell admissions officers something they don't learn from another part of the application. Make it authentic. After you finish, ask yourself why you wrote it. Remember: Essays help lift candidates at the margins – they very rarely are the thing that gets an applicant in.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Don't ask for recommendations from the usual suspects. Seek at least one recommendation from teachers outside your major area—an English teacher for science majors, for instance—to show your breadth of interests. Admissions officers want to read a letter from someone who can adequately describe your weaknesses but also detail your potential. And ask early: the popular teachers especially are overwhelmed in the fall with requests from seniors.

ACTIVITIES

Explain what matters to you. In the activities section on your application, put first what matters most to you. Use all of the space provided to describe the activity and the impact you made in it. Admissions officers are more interested in how you spent your time outside the classroom and less in judging you for what you did.

DEMONSTRATED INTEREST

Schools track your activity during the application process to see if you're really interested in them or just using them as a back-up. They call this "demonstrated interest." So, open the emails they send, attend the sessions when admissions officers visit your school, go on campus tours and connect with them on social media.

Return on Investment (ROI): The Value of the Degree

What makes a “good” college?

Families rely so much on the college rankings because it’s difficult in the course of the search to find the “right fit.” But there are fewer differences than we’re often led to believe between a school ranked in the top 20 and one ranked thirty or fifty spots lower.

So, how does one find those colleges off the beaten path, hidden further down in the rankings, and ultimately how does one determine the value of a degree?



People

Whenever you ask college graduates what remains with them long after they leave campus, you'll always hear about people. Long after graduates forget what they learned in a politics or philosophy class, they'll remember a professor, a coach or an adviser.

The Gallup-Purdue Index, which has surveyed tens of thousands of college graduates nationwide, found that well-being in life after college had less to do with where students went to school and more with what they did while they were there. Among six experiences Gallup identified with well-being are three associated with faculty: a professor who makes you excited about learning, cares about you and encourages you to pursue your dreams.

Seek out faculty members, coaches or club advisers during the search that you might encounter later on as an undergraduate. Ask how they interact with students on a daily basis. Could they

be a good mentor to you? Research suggests that finding a mentor increases the chances you'll stay in school and find success after college. Having a mentor in college who encouraged students to pursue their "goals and dreams" was found to be the strongest predictor of well-being out of anything that Gallup asked about. But here's the problem: only 14% of graduates recalled having a professor who made them excited about learning and encouraged them.⁴



Retention and Graduation Rates

Pay attention to the retention rate, which measures the percentage of freshmen who return for their sophomore year. The national average is around 81%. Most selective schools are above 90% and many highly ranked schools are above 85%.⁵

And scrutinize graduation rates. Fewer than 50% of students who enter college seeking a bachelor's degree complete one at the same institution within four years; 62%

finish in six years. Understand how graduation and retention rates differ for students like you. There's one rate for the college as a whole, but the numbers differ by major, family income and gender. For example, the national six-year graduation rate is higher for women than men (65% vs. 59%).⁵



Graduate Outcomes

It's difficult to separate whether what happens to students after college is the result of who they are or what they did while in college.

In recent years, economists have been digging deeper into a stockpile of data from tax records and job postings. What they're finding is starting to shift the conversation around the question "Does it matter where you go to college?"

For economists, it's a much more nuanced answer than before: majors and skills might count for more in the job market than the college itself. It makes sense. Employers hire for jobs requiring a distinct set of skills. Colleges as a whole don't signal that someone has those skills, but employers think a student's college major does.

Prospective college students now have access to data through the U.S. Education Department's College Scorecard (collegescorecard.ed.gov). It allows anyone a granular look at what graduates earn and how much debt they take on at a college, broken out by academic program.



⁴ Great Jobs, Great Lives: The 2014 Gallup-Purdue Index Report.

⁵ National Center for Education Statistics. The Condition of Education 2020. May 2020.

Conversation starters

HOLISTIC ADMISSIONS

Because many of the pieces of the college application are baked in long before the applicant ever starts the college search, families should discuss how the choices made early on in high school impact admissions.

In freshman year, begin tracking involvement in activities, volunteer efforts, and sports – and understand how the classes taken in the first two years may determine eligibility for advanced classes that can be taken as juniors and seniors.

- What academic classes interest you the most? What are the most rigorous courses in those academic areas that your high school offers? What prerequisites do you need to take in freshman and sophomore years to enroll in those rigorous classes in your junior and senior years?
- Where do you need to challenge yourself more in your selection of courses and where can you demonstrate a willingness to do that?
- Are you increasingly earning higher grades in more difficult courses or are you struggling? What are the tradeoffs to pulling back to easier classes?
- How many of the colleges you are considering are test-optional? Where do your test scores place you in the range of scores for different schools you're considering—are you at the top or above the middle 50 percent?
- How do you want to spend your time outside of class in high school? What activities interest you the most, and how much time do you want to dedicate to each? What impact do you want to have within those activities?
- What might you want to write your essays about, and how might the answers differ depending on the college you apply to?

ROI: THE VALUE OF A DEGREE

The outcomes of college are largely defined around jobs and earnings, but going to college provides graduates with more than just a job.

- What's most important to you in life and how do you define a successful outcome from college? How will different colleges on your list help you reach those goals?
- What might you want to major in? Do you want to go to graduate or professional school immediately after college or do you want to work?
- What do graduates of different schools you're considering do after graduation? Where do they work? How much do they earn, on average?
- What specific skills are listed as requirements in the job ads for those positions you might apply to after college? How can you acquire those skills in college both inside and outside the classroom?



About the author

Jeffrey Selingo has written about higher education for more than two decades and is a *New York Times* bestselling author of three books. His latest book, *Who Gets In & Why: A Year Inside College Admissions*, was published in September 2020 and was named among the 100 Notable Books of the year by the *New York Times*. A regular contributor to *The Atlantic*, Jeff is a special advisor for innovation and professor of practice at Arizona State University. He also co-hosts the podcast, *FutureU*. He lives in Washington, DC, with his family.

We see the future in you.SM — 